

The UN climate convention and the road through Paris



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Delegates from virtually every nation are meeting in Paris at the end of November for two weeks of talks aiming to finalise a new United Nations climate change agreement. This is the culmination of a 23-year international process aimed at combatting climate change.

Many countries have already set out their plans for cutting emissions. So what are they promising, and by when? And what else is on the agenda?



People marched on the streets of Lima, Peru on December 10th 2014.
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Combating climate change - a 23-year history

International negotiations on climate change take place within the [United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change \(UNFCCC\)](#).

This was one of the agreements signed at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. It has since been ratified by 195 countries.

The convention is a broad-brush, over-arching agreement. At its heart is a commitment to 'stabilisation of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic (human) interference with the climate system'.

Under the 1992 convention, rich countries agree to lead efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. They also agree to assist poorer nations in measures to reduce their emissions and to prepare climate change impacts.

The convention does not specify what is meant by 'dangerous' climate change. In 2010, [governments adopted](#) as a political definition the target of limiting global warming since pre-industrial times to 2°C.

The intention of the convention is that governments make other, more specific, agreements within it. The best known is the [Kyoto Protocol](#), signed in 1997. Developed nations agreed to cut emissions [by an average of 5.2%](#) by the period 2008-12. (The starting date, or 'baseline year', for agreements under the UNFCCC is nearly always 1990.) Although many governments (notably in Europe) have surpassed their Kyoto targets, a few other countries including the US and Canada withdrew from their commitments. The UNFCCC holds a summit every year, in November or December.

The most notable one in recent years was the 2009 summit in Copenhagen, which saw a major political push by leaders including Gordon Brown to tie up an ambitious, legally-binding global deal to cut emissions.

However, the summit [was beset](#) by splits between countries, mistrust and procedural problems. The outcome was a set of unilateral pledges by governments – the [Copenhagen Accord](#).

Countries' pledges took different forms according to their stage of economic development. The richest nations promised to cut emissions up to 2020 by various percentages. Those in mid-stages of development agreed to restrain the growth in emissions; while for the poorest, the main intention was to prepare for climate impacts. The overall scale of the carbon-cutting pledges [is not enough](#) to limit global warming to 2°C.

Alongside the Accord, developed nations agreed that by 2020, [they would ensure that](#) \$100bn per year is raised to help poorer countries adapt to climate impacts and reduce their emissions.

INDCs - who, what, how?

More than 160 countries have submitted their INDCs to date.

Following **Switzerland**, the **European Union** was the second party to submit its INDC, committing to cuts in greenhouse gas emissions of 'at least' 40% on 1990 levels by 2030.

Mexico was the first developing country to submit an INDC, and committed to reduce greenhouse gas and black carbon emissions by 25% below business-as-usual levels by 2030. **Gabon** was the first African nation, committing to reduce emissions by at least 50% by 2025 in comparison to the business-as-usual scenario. **Ethiopia** was the first Least Developed Nation to submit its INDC. It pledged a 64% reduction on business as usual emissions by 2030.

The **United States** pledged to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 26-28% below 2005 levels in 2025. **Canada** chose an emissions cut of 30% below 2005 levels by 2030. **Russia** committed to 'limiting anthropogenic greenhouse gases to 70-75% of 1990 levels by the year 2030' [i.e. a 25-30% reduction].

China pledged to cut its greenhouse gas emissions per unit of GDP by 60-65% from 2005 levels by 2030, and peak its emissions by 2030. **India** announced its INDC on 1 October. It intends to reduce emissions intensity of its GDP by 33-35% by 2030.

Costa Rica has reconfirmed its commitment to become carbon-neutral by 2021, and to reduce its emissions by 44% by 2030 compared to business as usual.

At the 2011 meeting, in Durban, South Africa, delegates set a new timetable under an agreement called the [Durban Platform](#). This commits them to finalising a new global deal, with some legal character, at the 2015 summit in Paris.

A deal with many options

At last year's summit, in Lima, Peru, governments [decided on](#) aspects of the agreement they plan to make in Paris. And in another meeting this October in Bonn, they concluded [a draft agreement](#). However, on many issues it contains a number of options that are as yet unresolved.

As well as the annual summits, the UNFCCC holds other meetings most years. The meeting in Bonn was one of a number of talks that have taken place in 2015. Progress is essential at these meetings if an agreement is to be made in Paris.

Emissions pledges

The centrepiece of the Lima agreement was that governments decided that each country would make its own unilateral pledge on cutting emissions (and other things too, if they want) called an [Intended Nationally Determined Contribution \(INDC\)](#).

The key component should be an emissions target for 2030.

More than 160 of the 195 countries involved in talks in Paris have submitted their climate pledges. The UN [analysed the sum total of the pledges](#) submitted by 1 October 2015, and concluded that the emissions reductions were likely to keep global warming below 3°C by 2100, but were not enough to keep it below the 2°C target.

Exactly what should go in an INDC was the subject of considerable wrangling.

Developed nations said they should include quantifiable information and time frames. However, the wording was [weakened](#) by India and China, and now says that INDCs 'may include' such details. One key aspect of the agreement made in Lima is that the dividing line between rich and poor countries seems to be blurring somewhat.

Since the UNFCCC's origin in 1992, countries have been divided into two blocs of developed and developing. But the reality is that some 'developing' countries such as [Singapore](#), Qatar and Brunei are now significantly richer than some in the 'developed' group (such as Ukraine, Bulgaria and Belarus). It is not yet clear how this will play out in the INDCs.

What else is on the Paris agenda?

There are several issues that are not yet resolved in the draft agreement.

One of these is the 'long term goal'. As the recent [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change \(IPCC\) report](#) showed, combatting climate change means [virtually eliminating the use of fossil fuels](#) (unless technology is deployed to capture and store carbon dioxide emissions). The document reflects that, containing an option for ['net zero emissions by 2050'](#); but many governments have reservations.

Climate finance is another sticky issue. The UN's Green Climate Fund, which is supposed to become the main mechanism for receiving and distributing the \$100bn per year agreed at Copenhagen, reached its goal of having \$10bn committed by the end of 2014. But there is no mechanism in place for raising that to the \$100bn per year figure. (See our [Briefing on Climate Finance](#) for details.)

The topic of 'loss and damage' has received increased attention in recent years. This refers to the ['residual' losses](#) that are 'locked in' as a result of past emissions from countries that industrialised early, such as the UK, and that cannot be avoided by reducing emissions or taking adaptation measures.

Compensation for these losses remains controversial. At the request of developing countries, the issue remains [on the table](#).

More clarity is also needed on ['backsliding'](#) – the idea that no country can make a contribution less ambitious than its previous one – and on a mechanism to 'ratchet up' INDCs so that eventually, governments are pledging carbon cuts deep enough to keep global warming below 2°C – because just about everyone involved recognises that the INDCs themselves are not likely to be sufficient.

The objective of the Paris summit in December is to secure a binding and universal agreement on climate change, based on the Lima document and building on all the work put in over the 23 years since governments first pledged to prevent 'dangerous' climate change at the Rio Earth Summit.



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